



IMAGINATION AND REALITY – PSYCHOANALYSIS VS. BAUDRILLARD

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The current inflation of the image is caused by circulation and corresponds to an overabundance of the imaginary in the subjective realm. We are drowning in a digital flood of images without context, of words without meaning and of fake information without differentiation. Following Baudrillard, we find ourselves in the age of the hypercirculation of images, a flood of intense immanence in cultural aesthetics that uncannily corresponds to contemporary images of oil slicks and water floods. The technological transformations and economic hyperspeculation correlate with the floods of images that are consumed immersively and produce the excess of the egomaniac. Circulation is intensified while production stagnates, and nothing circulates faster than digital images. However, the image is ambiguous in its vital illusion, it simply appears and disappears; it is a game of appearances. It is this illusion that is killed in the movement of a compulsive and excessive constitution of reality with its production and circulation of more and more digital images. The images become obscene because everything becomes visible. These images have their own form of violence and violate the image itself. In general, it is the ubiquity of media content that produces a phatic form of communication whose purpose is to keep the imaginary lines of communication open for the quantum unfolding of dense nodes of knowledge/power that we call the self. The medium and the real are now in a single fog whose truth is indecipherable.

The new phase of late capitalism is so characterized less by production than by circulation. It ushered in an enormous inflation of the image and the imaginary. In terms of subjects, this is an external and internal overflow generated by the lack of language and social ties, indeed by the lack of the symbolic. A reflective glass labyrinth combines with an overflowing oceanic feeling – the intensity intensifies.

Human perception actually consists of symbolic forms that are abstracted as patterns in the field of experience. In this view, feeling is then to be understood

as a continuity between the material forces and the conceptual force. In art, for example, the appearance of a lived vitality can be symbolically expressed in the form of feelings. However, there is often a confusion between the symbol and the symbolized. Technologies in particular can produce effects that are so much like feelings that we confuse them with feelings. And this then enables a mythology of feelings that can be described as the imaginary.

For example, the metastasization of musical production, circulation and technology makes music increasingly available today and collapses any distinction between background and foreground music. Music simulates vital activity, is omnipresent and thus hyper-audible. Music is administered as a permanent drone and thus becomes inaudible again. There is a scenario of music, sounds and noises that one does not necessarily have to listen to. The noise created by radio, the internet and smartphones, which is subtly integrated into everyday routines by invisible transformers, drives music and the system, according to Baudrillard, beyond its own end, so that there is simply no longer any reason for music to be heard or perceived. For Baudrillard, hi-fi music is already associated with a purification of sounds and the apparent liberation from noise and degenerates into integral music. Flawlessly merging into its own model, music liberates itself from music precisely by restoring sound to technical perfection. This technical perfection means that artificial noise is added to the signal to make it more musical again. Therein lies the danger of glitch music, which merely modulates frequencies, exploits errors and corrupts signals.

In psychoanalysis, the imaginary is a realm of shiny surfaces and illusion that can evaporate through fractures – broken glass and unbridgeable differences. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan postulates the imaginary, the symbolic and the real as three different but interdependent orders of psychic experience. The domain of the subject always remains correlated with an objective area of the social. The

imaginary is the register of images, identifications, wholes and projections; the symbolic is the register of language, institutions, laws and orders; the real is the register of that which catalyzes the imaginary and eludes the symbolic – the impossible, the unrepresentable, the material or the insignificant. There is an overlap between these three fundamental areas, because the subject of the unconscious is multifaceted and divergent.

Images represent a not insignificant part of the medial imaginary. For Lacan, visibility or being-in-the-image is an important characteristic of subjectivity. The subject sees, but it is also always visible, it is always seen, and being looked at is part of subjectivity. Between the gaze and the subject today is a universe of images that can no longer be overlooked, which dictates to subjects how they should see and how they should look. Today, it is the screen and its image technologies that play a constitutive role for the gaze and the visibility of the subject. Image technologies are changing historical formations in which regimes of the gaze materialize. One could ask whether there is such a thing as a digital gaze today. If one connects the digital with Lacan's discrete symbolic order and the gaze with the cinema or the imaginary, there could probably be no digital gaze. But it doesn't seem to be that simple: With the operational like culture constantly ordering images, the individual becomes a commodified data set and at the same time integrated into a visual circulation, reinforcing the desire to be constantly seen. It is a circular gaze. The second gaze also inscribes the digital system into the individual in an ultra-brutal and ultra-liberal way.

The millions of ever-smiling selfies circulating in social media or online advertising create an endless surface of images organized by likeability. The user voluntarily makes himself visible by means of Photoshop, whereby the selfie represents his desire to pose for the gaze, insofar as he, as the one who photographs himself, places himself under the gaze regime of both others and the

digital system itself. The accumulation of likes allows the accumulation of capital to seep into the screen and produces certain standards of beauty on it. Users offer themselves to the gaze of the digital regime and shamelessly exhibit a fluid jouissance, unaware that the regime is constantly staging the continuity between jouissance and capitalization and marketing nue. With the networked images of the digital system, the gaze now comes from everywhere and therefore leaves hardly any possibility of anonymity. It amounts to total visibility and the totalitarian, monitoring and quantifying gaze of the state and capital.

Today we are dealing with an overemphasis on immediate and fluid communication in networks, an excess of images, an overemphasis on presence and an overvaluation of identity – factors that all prevent or even exclude the functioning of the symbolic. In the process, immersion in the imaginary triggers all kinds of psychological disorders, fantasies of self-assertion and egomaniacal delusions. Each of these affects feeds into or is generated by contemporary media culture and algorithmic logic. However, we must not forget that the images are also repeatedly fed with narratives and myths (Roland Barthes) – think of the bloody steak that promises strength, or Redbull that makes you fit and boosts your performance

The mirror image is the elementary trope of the imaginary, but mirrors can also be cracked. The smooth and the broken are the polarities of the imaginary. As the mirror trope emphasizes, the imaginary is primarily a visual register of everyday knowledge. The more images enter our lifeworld, the glossier the pan to video, the more mundane the selfies – the more effectively the medium propels an immense imaginary.

This is where Baudrillard raises his first objection to psychoanalysis. With reference to Lacan's mirror stage, Baudrillard has assigned the mirror and its doublings to a different epoch than today's epoch of simulation and speculation. Baudrillard writes that reality today is no longer linked to the reflexive truth of the mirror, but is based on the manipulative truth of the test that tests, the laser that probes and cuts, the matrices that store sequences, the genetic code that controls combinations, the cells that inform a sensory universe, and, one must add, the speculation that multiplies money. (Baudrillard 1976) It is therefore no longer about the doubling of the real/reality in the imaginary, but about the transformation, generation and new construction of reality through simulation, and it is precisely this hyper-reality that appears particularly real because it already contains perception and actions as factors in the construction of reality. With this objection, Baudrillard also invents a different concept of reality and the real than psychoanalysis.

In its critique of the media, contemporary psychoanalysis today often draws on Lacan's elaborations on narcissism, which are based on image technologies. Hypervisibility forces us to meticulously manicure ourselves. Narcissism relates fundamentally to the image; the subject invests libidinally not in a substantiality such as the "I", but in the effects of the technology of the mirror. A selfie is never enough. Self-assertion here means endless presentation: always on, hyper-stylized, self-identical, constantly in view. The circulating self-image also determines the image of the other, insofar as the narcissist's self-absorption captures the other in a way that is closely related to sadism (the instinct to dominate). The sadist smooths over the other and constructs the infliction of suffering while forbidding any reaction. The recruitment of the other for sadistic validation indicates at least the narcissist's effort to make contact with a zone of otherness, channeling this effort through technologies that short-circuit the conscious relationship, through ever more images and ever faster circulation.

Here, too, Baudrillard raises a certain objection. He speaks of a phantom subject. This delirious subject is a kind of self-indulgent egomaniac who, unlike the narcissist, does not concentrate on the (unsuccessful) doubling of his own self, but instead exhibits his ego in the digital in order to constantly capture contact and feedback, as a kind of transmitting and simultaneously absorbing screen. Alterity disappears here in the cursed flow of self-construction. Lacan's statement that what I want is the good of others, provided it remains in my image, now comes to nothing, for it still remains in the narcissistic figure, while what Baudrillard calls Look no longer inhales narcissism, but poses an offensive self-exhibition as a video image, a kind of egoism that, with its illustrated selfies, brings everyday forms of individuality programs into play, which, however, do not merely identify the ego as a post-creative producer, but above all as an end consumer of social media. (Baudrillard 1992: 31) This could also be described as a self-optimizing existential striptease. Egoists are absolutely dependent on the (virtual) outside world, they need others who confirm them and who do not function as mere appendages to their delirious egos. Contemporary urban subjectivity is fleeting or fluid.

Subjectivity in the big city today is lashed down in a dozen applications on digital devices such as the smartphone. There is a pocket subject packed with gadgets that indicate how production, circulation and consumption have become phases of control, imagination and behavior management. What sociologist Eva Illouz calls "scopic capitalism" is an incessant consumption of the image in an economy of reputation inflated by internet platforms. Avatar fetishists constantly consume images that produce self-personal "presence" management as a spontaneous shimmer without a thought for miners, chip microprocessors and server farms.

On the scopic terrain, according to psychoanalysis, the imaginary gains in importance while the symbolic dwindles. Such a constellation tends to create a sense of immediacy: without a common language, there is only the mirror of alternative facts and ghastly faces, distortions and outbursts.

There is now also an immediatism that constantly demands imaginary realities, encounters with that which bypasses or precedes symbolic mediation. The confirmation is the flat reciprocity that the immediacy style calls for. "It's me!" Versions of affirmation call for the accumulation of likes on social media to university composition pedagogy, generating "I feel seen" mantras to self-help on an industrial scale. It is a watered-down version of recognition, the final vector of liberalism that redirects struggles for power and resources into struggles for respect and identity. The position outlined here, which, in contrast to Baudrillard's look with Lacan, brings narcissism back into play, is represented in this form by Anna Kornbluh. (Kornbluh 2023) In doing so, the symbolic is missed or even eliminated. However, it continues to insist insofar as the referent has disappeared in the technical programming of the image. Without representation, we have a simulation. Simulation through which the world is replaced by what Baudrillard calls a kind of ersatz universe, a counter-world of signs. This sounds similar to the Lacanian schema, according to which what is seen is not only prefigured by an imaginary construction, according to which nothing at all can be seen that is not always already permeated by a sign structure.

Mario Perniola also offers a different perspective on digital realities. Digital network systems redefine space, architecture and media and at the same time call into question traditional perceptions and ideas of the environment. For example, when a geographical area (consisting of humans, non-human organisms and artificial objects) is described by biotechnologies in the form of information codes, communication flows and big data, an exchange takes place between the organic and the organic. Matter can become an informatic code – a hybrid of

human, technical, mechanical and non-human elements. Exteriority and specularity emerge in this phase: The individual moves away from an organic, subjective, inner feeling and lets the world – including the technological world – take effect. For this reason, it would be misleading for Perniola to refer to our age merely as the age of narcissism. The hybridization between things and people is then understood merely as a further step into the realm of alienation and reification.

To come now to the question of reality. What does Baudrillard mean by (hyper)reality? Like Michel Serres, Baudrillard assumes that today the triad of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic has shifted into the virtual or simulative, whereby the imaginary appears as pixelated in digital space, as phantasmatic and objective. The virtual, not to be confused with Deleuze's virtual, generates the phantasmatic phenomena qua simulation as a new reality and at the same time pays homage to the digital code. The cogito of the transcendental subject is replaced by the cogitat of virtual apparatuses, writes Kurt Röttgers.

The imaginary illusion is thus replaced by a virtual reality; an illusory quality is created, which is installed by sign and image-generating and already coded processes. If computer simulations allow insights that cannot be gained in real reality, then not only do virtual reality and real reality become increasingly indistinguishable in the course of the technical feasibility of a transition from one reality to another, but the difference between possibility and reality is also cut. What is possible in virtual reality is actually realized, whereby it is the simulative machines that increasingly regulate themselves and tend to make humans superfluous. While the simulative illusion constantly generates more visibility and transparency as a reflection and not just as a reflection (images, statistics and

signs), the code of the binary remains invisible and clings to the secret that is actually alien to the simulation.

The difference between simulation and reality now seems to be abolished, insofar as the simulation is realized as reality and reality is realized as simulation. The system has entered its “fatal” phase, which Baudrillard also calls an “integral reality”. Baudrillard’s simulation hypothesis also states that the metaphysical statement about a boundary that separates reality from appearance through all mediations is capped by the simulation. The perverse figure of the undecidability of reality and simulation short-circuits the dialectic of the classical metaphysics of reality/being and appearance.

The undecidable fluxion of the images and signs controlled by the code, which Baudrillard sees circulating in accelerated acceleration and in pure and at the same time differential self-reference, points to the anti-mimetic character of the concept of simulation, which also characterizes simulation as the “divine referentiality of images” (Baudrillard 1978: 16). The images and signs, which here are always those of the code, are now their own pre-images, which precede reality in the form of a “precession of the simulacra”. This means, on the one hand, that they become more important than material reality and, on the other, that they are part of a medially mediated reality, whereby the connection between these two realities would have to be clarified. Both the logical and the temporal relationship between image/sign and reality has now been reversed.

Simulation does not imitate reality; rather, hyperreal spaces are about the simulation of reality by means of the generation and multiplication of its

appearance, but not only its appearance, as Žižek assumes, but even more about the generation of signs, codes, forms and models that materialize the appearance. Simulation disillusions and denaturalizes reality precisely by means of artificial processes that are responsible for their own hyper-reality. Both the simulated hyper-reality and, increasingly, the real reality are now effects, pure games and calculations of the code, which is now also the real/reality, at least the real that the simulation itself generates (not the real as the limit of the system). Behind the images perceived through the screen, the simulated effects of reality, a subjectless calculation plays out in series of zeros and ones, that of the code, which Žižek calls the real with reference to Lacan. For Baudrillard, however, this operative calculation of the code is only one aspect of the simulated real (in addition to the signs and images generated by the code), while it does not concern the real as the limit of the system. The simulation attempts to “realize” the real, to extract what is only implicitly present in it and make it explicit. In this sense, simulation is precisely not a form of illusion, but rather a counter-design to illusion, a way of getting rid of the illusion of the world that is fundamental to Baudrillard.

Rex Butler has objected that the real in Baudrillard’s work must be differentiated, which in my opinion must ultimately lead to a distinction being made between the real and reality. On the one hand, in Baudrillard there is a real (distinguished from the real, or more precisely reality as an effect of the hyperreal) that represents the limit for all systems, a real that no system could ever fully grasp or explain (an aspect that is hardly noticed by Baudrillard’s critics and commentators). There is a kind of inner limit, so that even if the system expands endlessly, it is never completely closed, because something always remains outside. And Baudrillard calls this inner boundary, this difference, the (primary) real. This bears a certain resemblance to Laruelle’s real, which remains eternally closed and impregnable even for the system.

On the other hand, there is also the (secondary) real, which is produced by the

system of hyperreality itself (which should not be described as real, but rather as reality). It is what the simulation constantly spits out and generates as reality. In the process, reality is made accessible through the incessant operativity of the technical and the virtual. The simulation works ceaselessly on the completion of hyper-reality and on the dissolution of the (primary) real, which is to remain merely as a blurred trace, as a referential corpse, although it shimmers as ideology in all conceivable forms, reserve fetishes and myths, precisely in order to avoid the intrusion of the actual real.

Through the unlimited production of images, the world ultimately becomes an image. Nothing remains of the world. The definition of the real in the era of third-order simulacra states that an equivalent simulative (re)production dominates the system. There is now a hallucinatory similarity of the real with itself. But how can we then speak of the real as a limit if everything is apparently simulation? At least it is clear that today models are not only aids for approximating the real, rather they have an effect on the real, indeed they change the real and themselves become an important part of reality.

Butler thus claims that Baudrillard uses “the real” in two ways: on the one hand, it is the (simulated) reality that is constantly produced by theoretical or socio-economic-cultural systems, and on the other, it stands for that real which functions as a limit for such systems (that which ultimately lies outside the system, but is constantly in danger of being devoured by the simulation). (Butler 1999: 17) The real thus becomes a particular challenge for theory. Baudrillard attempts to use the (primary) real to think what remains removed from simulation or escapes from it and what does not simply disappear or dissolve. Especially when, as today, the real is expelled from simulation, exiled as it were, it can become an extreme phenomenon that is constantly derailed and can only be grasped as an illusion. (Baudrillard 1992: 151) Baudrillard attempts to think the

“thing in itself”, so to speak, the object before the sign, but of course he can only say what it is through the sign. It is about this thing that is excluded, but which makes it possible for the signs to exchange with each other. And this thing is precisely the real, which ensures a kind of transcendence that one would not expect from Baudrillard. The thing, which is both singular and universal, is quasi prior to the sign, that which remains excluded by each of them, and yet is at the same time an effect of the same. For the second real, which is an effect of the sign, we use the concept of reality. Through a strange reversal, this “reality” has been transformed from an independent variable into a dependent variable. It has become dependent on the information that produces it and that enables the actors to bet on its results and events. The information itself is now the independent fact and has the status previously held by a primary “reality”. It, the information, is now the necessary precondition, reason and medium for every bet on the future.

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